

## **Harry Black 50th Anniversary of the Waterside Workers Film Group**

Contribution by Harry Black at the launching of the book written about the W.W.F. Film Group held at the National Maritime Museum.

The decade of the 50's was one of the most dangerous and challenging periods in the history of the labour movement.

The Labor Government of Ben Chifley had been swept from power late in 1949. This marked the beginning of the long reign of the Liberal Government led by Pig Iron Bob Menzies. Asked how he got the name, 'Pig Iron Bob' he replied, "It was that bastard Moran."

Menzies first act was to bring down a Bill to Ban the Communist Party. A number of Communist Party trade union officials were named, including Jim Healy and Elliott V. Elliott. The Waterside Workers Federation engaged Dr. Evatt and the Bill known as The Red Bill was thrown out by the High Court. This did not deter Menzies, who by way of a Referendum placed it before the people of Australia. Again it was defeated.

Menzies and his wealthy friends were determined to destroy the militant trade unions. Coming back from one of his many trips to England and America in 1951, Menzies gravely announced we must prepare for war in three years.

However the "cold war" and the class war were well advanced in the maritime industry. ASIO Agents launched raids on the Federal Offices of the W.W.F. and Seamen and the Sydney and Melbourne offices of the Waterside Workers.

As a consequence, 60 Sussex Street, the office of the Sydney Wharfies developed into a centre of action, agitation and organization.

The meetings and decisions made there attracted the attention of State and Federal Governments and their secret police. Many of you will recall working on the job with Federal Agent Clive Young and Rex Cann a state policeman who became a Sergeant of Police while spying for the State Government.

Meetings displaying the "House Full" sign went up when the Red Dean of Canterbury Hewlett Johnson spoke and Paul Robson gave his finest Sydney performance and the famous war correspondent Wilfred Burchett attracted an overflow attendance.

The stage was set for a show down between the government, shipping representatives and the Waterside Workers Federation.

A letter from the Royal Dutch Shipping Cartel to the Federal Government which fell off the "back of a truck" into the hands of Jim Healy, called for the destruction of the Waterside Workers Union and led up to the National Strike of November 1954.

All the signs of a show down with the employers and government had been signaled and the Sydney Branch was well prepared for that conflict. A well organized United Front Executive, a powerful rank and file Delegates Organisation, supplemented and led by many active Communist Party members and 60 Sussex Street became a centre of intense activity.

Tom Nelson, Sydney Branch Secretary---on the black list of Menzies Red Bill, a dedicated Communist matured by years in defence of working conditions and wise to the skullduggery of ruthless employers and politicians carefully prepared members for action.

Part of that action was the creation of the Sydney Branch Film Group.

Today we recall and honour the achievements of this group. The work of Jock Levy, Norma Disher and the late Keith Gow, moulded it into a highly valued and successful part of the industrial and political

struggles of the 50's.

The screening of the first film "Pensions for Veterans" in Leichhardt Stadium left a lasting impression and impact upon the 6000 wharfies at that stop work meeting.

The November Victory was recorded-----Waterfront history was made. The skill of the film producers' art was demonstrated and highlighted the significance of the United Front, the commitment of delegates, gang leaders and rank and file members.

These were the "golden years" of the maritime industry. 60 Sussex Street was, however, much more than a place where films were produced. Movies were screened to members at mid-day showing the art and culture of people from many countries.

There were also book and Art exhibitions, piano recitals, ballet performances and opera. There were also art and dance classes for children.

And the magnificent mural was created by the artistic skills of wharfies Ralph Sawyer, Sonny Glynn and Clem Millwood. Their skill was directed and developed by the vision of an outstanding artist Rod Shaw.

And another fine artist to have a significant influence on the artistic and cultural life of wharfies was Nan Horton.

Oscar Hammerstein said "All the sounds of the earth are like music."

And the sounds of the waterfront are like music to maritime workers.

And the music of the Sydney Civic Orchestra was enjoyed and appreciated at the wharfies union hall early in the 50's.

And the songs, music and drama of New Theatre delighted wharfies and the general public for many years.

All of these rich and exciting events formed a vital part of a development of a high social, industrial and political consciousness in maritime workers and the high point of this awareness was the great value of their union and the need to build international good will and unity in action.

The Film Group gave us this visual picture of wharfies at work and at the same time the formulation of union policies. These films captured the humour of wharfies which was always a feature of their work and their industrial and political activities off the job. The films were not just about propaganda but in essence about political education. The skill and the heart and soul are contained in these films. They demonstrate the hard obnoxious nature of some cargoes, but they highlight the nature of mateship, of collective organization. In these films is shown the work and integrity of a great union.

All the principles and values of the Waterside Workers Federation enabled it to win significant conditions of work and industrial battles in 1954-56.

Our history goes back to 1872. It has enriched the trade union movement and the political history of our country.

We have learnt some sharp lessons from our history. But we must at the same time look to the future and the future belongs to the M.U.A. The leadership of the MUA, the young members who are delegates and members of union committees have been tested in action and have good runs on the board.

They will again be challenged in the future, but I am confident that they will produce great films and works of art and at the same time ensure a rich and productive history as members of the MUA.